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Imperfection: The Will-to-Control and the Struggle of Letting Go

Cover Page Footnote

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Imperfection: The Will-to-Control and the Struggle of Letting Go

W. Keith Duffy

I've got a confession to make: I want my students' writing to be *perfect*. I want them to always create spellbinding introductions and use knockout examples. I want them to consistently avoid confusing pronoun shifts and comma splices. I want them to always write with style, grace, and fairness about opposing viewpoints, while developing stunning refutations and humbling accommodations. I want them to always use proper transitional phrases and avoid clichés all the time. I want their writing to be *perfect, perfect, perfect*.

At one point in my life, I thought this was a sensible and even admirable objective. After all, the foundation of my training as a high school and college writing instructor rested upon the notion that the truly great teachers—the ones Hollywood made movies about—were the ones who never stopped pushing their students toward perfection. This notion was further reinforced by professors, career advisors, and cooperating teachers throughout my education: clearly, if I was serious about teaching, I should never accept anything less than perfection from my students, for, if I did, chaos would ensue. I learned this lesson so thoroughly that it became my mantra, my religion. And, as a professional, I was rewarded for it.

After about ten years of teaching and a great deal of self-confrontation, I have finally recognized this training as some of the most damaging I have ever received in my life. By sheer grace, I've finally come to acknowledge that my desire for unrealistic, unobtainable perfection from student writers has actually stunted me as a teacher rather than helped; it represents the biggest professional—and personal—obstacle I've ever faced. Indeed, it has been responsible for some of my lowest, most manipulative moments as a teacher of writing. In my crusade for perfection, I have become the king of appropriation. Over the years, I have consciously taken control of my students' writing for what I considered to be their own good, wrenching their unsteady words from the page and replacing them with my own. I have rewritten their paragraphs and, in some instances, entire essays, and I have obliterated their voices in doing so. In one instance when I was brave enough to actually scrutinize what I was doing, I found that after commenting on a paragraph in a student's rough draft—and doing a bit of ghost-

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writing—I had added 128 words to the student’s original 59 words, and, of those 59, about half of them had been significantly revised by me somehow. Clearly this was an act of wholesale appropriation, and I committed this act to avoid the chaos of undeveloped arguments, the chaos of unclear pronoun references, the chaos of disorganization—in other words, the chaos of imperfection.

I resist making claims of having vanquished this shortcoming. I know my desire for perfection from student writers persists, and I confront it often. I am, of course, aware of the expert advice of teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition challenging me to relinquish tight control in the classroom (Moxley; Probst; Rule). I’ve read the horror stories of student writers who have become the victims of appropriation (Brannon and Knoblauch; Connors and Lunsford). I have considered the respected opinions of those who suggest that all teachers should examine and challenge the imbalanced and often harmful power relationships inherent in any classroom (Freire; Murray; Shor). While these viewpoints have helped me to mediate my controlling behavior somewhat, I’ve never had too much success comprehensively changing my classroom approach. Each year, when confronted by the imperfections in student writing, I would return faithfully to my tireless search for perfection, and the cycle of appropriation would begin again—crossing out paragraphs and rewriting them wholesale in my own style, redrafting almost entire essays for students, correcting every error I could find. Semester after semester, it became clear that approaching the problem of my perfectionism from pedagogical, political, or psychological angles wasn’t working. I needed an alternative.

Ultimately, that alternative came in the form of the *spiritual*. Through a great deal of self-examination—and with the help of spiritually aware writers like Parker Palmer and Mary Rose O’Reilly—I’ve come to understand that my will-to-control is evidence of a spiritual imbalance. In this essay, I would like to share several key realizations that have helped me to begin articulating an alternative to my controlling behaviors. This discussion begins with an examination of spiritual notions of *imperfection* and ends by acknowledging the *essential role of imperfection* in the writing classroom—not as a brokenness to be fixed or a problem to be solved, but as the source of all humanity and community, indeed as something to be honored. Because of these realizations, I am becoming more able every day to “let go” of my unrelenting demand for perfection and, in so doing, “let go” of my students as well.

The Reality of Imperfection

Whether an imperfection appears in the form of a comma splice, a logical fallacy, or a stubborn refusal to participate in peer review, my impulse as a teacher is often to solve the problem, to do whatever is needed, to go to any length, so that the error is fixed. Often, the colleagues who most impress us are efficient and creative problem solvers; I myself like to be identified this way. In fact, our need to fix problems is so ingrained in our way of thinking that it is mirrored in some of the most basic theories of rhetoric. For example, according to Lloyd Bitzer, a rhetorical situation first requires an exigency, the realization that something remains unfinished, an urgent need to correct a wrong (5). In my role as

teacher, this same impulse to identify and fix flaws in my students often defined my relationship with them. It was this ingrained way of thinking about imperfections as “problems to be solved” that kept me from having real relationships with most of my students. Instead of being a mentor, a facilitator, a fellow writer, or even a friend to students, I always cast myself in the role of “the one who is charged with identifying and fixing imperfections in students’ writing.”

There is, though, a completely different way of approaching imperfection—a spiritually-sensitive approach best suggested by the umbrella term *spirituality of imperfection*. True to its name, a spirituality of imperfection posits that, at our very cores, we are flawed. Indeed, being imperfect is a natural condition of being human, and by acknowledging our imperfection as commonplace, we can more fully participate with each other *because* this establishes a shared ground. Although acknowledging ourselves as essentially imperfect is certainly challenging, spiritual writers have long insisted on the importance of accepting our dual, paradoxical, mixed-up natures as human beings if we are to unite in meaningful ways. For instance, as Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham point out, the most ancient wisdom of the human race is the “vision of *the human* as essentially mixed, somehow in the middle. To-be-human is to be fundamentally finite, essentially limited, *not-God*” (56). Kurtz and Ketcham offer the ancient Greek image of Dionysus, the god of wine, who, although overweight and often drunkenly stumbling about with a lewd and foolish look on his face, was considered the “promoter of civilization and a lover of peace.” Because of his imperfections, Dionysus could be called a joyful god who also suffered. This notion of human beings as both godly and paradoxically imperfect sprawls across the centuries and has been echoed by many writers. In 1654, French mathematician and mystic Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* wrote that humans are “a Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything” (72). Similarly, William Barrett suggests that “man occupies a middle position in the universe, between the infinitesimal and the infinite” (117). H. Sheldon Smith quotes Reinhold Niebuhr, who characterizes humans as standing

at the juncture of nature and spirit. On the one hand, he [sic] is involved in the order of nature and is therefore bound. On the other hand, as spirit he transcends nature and himself and is therefore free. Being both bound and free, both limited and unlimited, he invariably experiences anxiety. (210)

It is precisely this anxiety, this tension between paradoxical states, that a spirituality of imperfection says is the cornerstone of a spiritual life.

In more classical religious terms, our mixed-up-ness, our essential imperfection, is illustrated as the confused condition of being both “saint and sinner,” both “beast and angel,” paradoxes that reside in everyone. In his writings, Saint Augustine promotes wholeness by teaching that within each person and within the community as a whole, both good and evil, strength and weakness, coexist, while simultaneously detailing how in this life everyone is to some extent defective and, hence, no one is exempt from the need to seek forgiveness (Miles 1). The apostolic desert father Hermas explores in his writings the conflict between the good and bad angels within each of us (Glimm). Likewise, an even more

ancient story illustrates the very mixed nature of the human condition. One Greek myth claims that the human race evolved from

the remains of the Titans who, because they had eaten an infant god, contained a tiny portion of divine soul-stuff, which was passed on to humans. This Titan myth neatly explained to the ancient Greek why he felt himself to be at once a god and a criminal, why he experienced both the “Appoline” awareness of remoteness from the divine, but also the inkling of identity with it. (Kurtz and Ketcham 57)

To these and many other spiritual teachers and writers, our mixed-up-ness, our limitations, our imperfections, our confused states as both saint-and-sinner and beast-and-angel and human-and-god is the essential paradox that undergirds a spirituality of imperfection. As humans we yearn for a sense of unity in the midst of our “both-and” nature, a need for wholeness amidst our imperfections, a desire to make commensurate the many paradoxes within us.

Understanding the pervasive nature of this confusion, of this imperfection, was my first step in reevaluating my response to the imperfections in students’ writing. From this spiritual perspective, our imperfections are precisely what make us human; they are what give us common ground. In fact, it seems spiritual writers went much further than that. They seem to say that the instability commonly experienced by all humans is to be *honored* because it is precisely our imperfection that unites us in need; it is why students and teachers fundamentally need each other. From this perspective, I began to see a glimmer of how I might retool my relationship to imperfect student writing. Rather than using controlling behaviors to mediate flawedness and, in effect, distance myself from my students by playing the role of “problem solver,” I could instead allow imperfection to deliver me to them by acknowledging the fact that imperfection—including my own—is the very foundation upon which we build our lives. Rather than perceiving imperfection in student writing solely as “error-to-be-fixed,” I began to wonder how imperfection might act as a nexus, a point of contact among essentially imperfect human beings to explore and discuss themselves and their writing. But in order to make this change of heart, I first had to make explicit the relationship between my own sense of imperfection and my tendency to control my students as writers.

If We Are Imperfect, We Don’t Have Control

For a spirituality of imperfection, there is no give and take on the matter of our incompleteness. The human condition is a condition of limitation and flawedness. And the very realness of our limitation brings us back around to a discussion of control: because of our paradoxical, mixed, and incomplete conditions, we can also not be in absolute control of anything, at least this is what a spirituality of imperfection professes. To have absolute control would mean that we are not imperfect. Personally, I’ve become quite adept at resisting the reality of my essentially limited self by further seeking to control reality in order to deny or diminish my limitations. Striving for control, I imagine, is the most com-

mon reaction when we come face to face with our own limited natures and the limited natures of others. It was precisely this—my will-to-control—that was at the root of my interactions with my students; I was unwilling to accept the reality that my students' writing was imperfect, and I would do whatever was needed to deny that reality—even to the point of appropriation. In a spirituality that honors imperfection, the discussion of control centers around *willfulness*. In the case of my dysfunctional relationship with beginning writers and the way I appropriated their writing, it was my willfulness that made meaningful relationships impossible. As Kurtz and Ketcham argue:

The problem with “willing what cannot be willed” is that we step into a territory that is not ours. Our attempts to wrest control from the uncontrollable has [sic] become the keynote characteristic of our “Age of Addiction.” We try to command those aspects of our lives that cannot be commanded, we try to coerce what cannot be coerced, and in doing so, we ironically destroy the very thing we crave. (126)

I sought help with this problem, and, as I mentioned, I eventually turned to books like Mary Rose O'Reilley's *Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice*, Parker Palmer's *To Know as We are Known*, and Wendy Bishop's *Teaching Lives*. In the pages of these books, however, I initially bristled at what I read because, as my controlling self complained, the advice being offered felt too uncritical, too impractical, and too vague. For example, Parker Palmer's now almost-famous catch-phrase “To teach is to create a space” seemed to reposition the teacher as an influential but ultimately shadowy figure working diligently behind the scenes. And, further exploring the territory mapped out by Palmer, Mary Rose O'Reilly states that any sense of control a teacher might have is truly a mirage: “Most of us believe, at some level, that what happens in the classroom is caused by the teacher. In reality, we cause or control very little. To ‘create a space’ acknowledges both our sphere of responsibility and our lack of control” (2). In response, I thought bitterly, “How is advice like that supposed to help me?” Likewise, Bishop suggests that it took her quite a long time to admit that she could not control students but could only determine her own “inner weather” (314). I didn't like what I heard from these authors because, in essence, they were all asking me to face the reality of my powerlessness. But without control, I snarled, what was I to do?

I knew these writers were borrowing and synthesizing ideas from a variety of theological and philosophical traditions. I knew, too, that in many spiritual and religious traditions, issues of control and the need for perfection are considered obstacles to openness and freeness. By controlling others—and oneself—in the never-ending search for perfection, individuals prevent themselves from interacting meaningfully with others. In turn, they deny themselves access to their own spirituality, a spirituality that requires an essential willingness to be with others *as they are* and *as we are*—limited and in need (Downey 1-8). Sensibly, many traditions suggest that the only way to begin the journey toward living fully in the imperfect reality of the ordinary world is to relinquish the need for control and to “let go” of notions of perfection. According to the ideas distilled

from many religious traditions, wholeness, or what we can ever know of it, involves the

letting go of three needs: the need to be in control, the need to be effective, and the need to be right, for detachment from control and the surrender of *the demand to have the last word* seems a prerequisite to the kind of listening that allows for participation. We need to become detached [. . .] from self-importance and the urge to dominate others. (Rohr 3)

Although presented here as three distinct elements, “letting go” of the need for control, the need to be effective, and the need to be right essentially point to the same problem: the destructive nature of controlling others in a search for unobtainable perfection, as well as the difficulty of relinquishing such a desire. “Letting go,” as expressed here, is a tall order and one that, when I first glanced at it, seemed ridiculous. I argued that “letting go” was a ludicrous and even dangerous notion that was incommensurate with my role as a teacher of writing. As I mentioned earlier, in my training as a high school and college writing instructor, I was repeatedly exhorted to do just the opposite: to watch out for students and save them from failing, to keep a close eye on their progress and catch them when they stumbled, to set them aright when they wandered. The concept of “letting go” simply did not seem to apply to the writing classroom at all. After all, I asked myself, how can I continue to be a teacher if I relinquish the need for effectiveness? How on earth can I succeed in an academy that rewards those who desire to have the last word? Likewise, how could I possibly relinquish control and continue to teach a skill that, for centuries, has been characterized as the art of “observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” on a given topic (Aristotle 153)?

In the long run, of course, I discovered that these writers knew something I didn’t. With my willfulness in full swing, I was unable to see “letting go” as a viable alternative to controlling my students. But that was because I was focusing on the wrong thing. In my first encounter with “letting go,” I focused on—and became anxious about—the loss of control, the loss of effectiveness, and the loss of being right. Suddenly it felt as though “letting go” required me to have no ground to stand on. Although I desperately wanted to curb my controlling behaviors, this alternative felt too risky. “Letting go” seemed to be stated in such absolute terms, without degrees of any kind. “Letting go” meant just that—a complete relinquishing. Facing this dilemma, I returned again and again to these three basic needs—the need to be in control, the need to be effective, and the need to be right—examining them closely and searching for some way to make sense of them. Eventually, as I did this, the word *need* surfaced and started to have a significance that I hadn’t considered before. And then it clicked: a spirituality that honored imperfection was not telling me that I couldn’t be in control, be effective, or even be right, at times. These things in and of themselves are not bad. However, what is a major hindrance to living and interacting fully with others is our *willful need* for such things. It is, in fact, our desire, our drive, our *need* to be in control, our *need* to be right, and our *need* to be effective that keep us from being right and being effective and feeling in control. More importantly, it was

my *willful need* for my students to be perfect writers and thinkers that kept me from having real relationships with them. The thing I always assumed was laudable—having high expectations for students and being willing to do whatever was needed to perfect their writing—was precisely the *need* that isolated me from them, and from myself. I was not being asked to relinquish my effectiveness or my sense of rightness, but I was being asked to let go of my desire to have these things with any degree of certainty:

[S]pirituality begins in the acceptance that one is not “in control,” and this necessarily involves a flexible attitude, which requires a mistrust of the rigidities of certainty. In recognizing spirituality’s—life’s—open-endedness, we learn to be flexible and adaptable, thus protecting ourselves from the tendency to want to fix things “once and for all.” (Kurtz and Ketcham 135)

Although it is an uncomfortable undertaking, I eventually discovered, with the help of these and other writers, that a spiritual approach to imperfection challenges us to swim about in the soup of our own uncertainties and limitations. This is precisely the difficult—indeed, daunting—task that a spirituality of imperfection asks of us. In the language of twelve-step spirituality, it is in the lived acceptance and admission of our own powerlessness, in the acknowledgment that we are not in control, that our capacity for being with others is born. A spirituality that honors imperfection begins with the recognition that our controlling attempts to be perfect and our controlling attempts to make others perfect by manipulating them are the most selfish and the most tragic human mistakes. It is by realizing that our imperfections—our essentially limited natures as human beings—are the basis for our humanity that we can begin to realize our own capacity to be with others as learners in the writing classroom.

However, my tendency to want absolute control over my own imperfections—and the imperfections in my students’ writing—is precisely what alienated me from them. Responding to imperfection by attempting to control it—very understandable though it may be—was a willful act of denial on my part. And when we deny our own and our students’ imperfections, we deny everyone’s humanity. For a writing teacher like me who had a penchant for control and a desire for everyone to write and think as perfectly as possible, this was a difficult lesson to learn. In my rational mind, my control was disguised as assistance being offered to help students improve their writing. This, of course, points to the insidious nature of control. Fortunately, I found spiritual writers and teachers reminding me again and again that I simply was not in absolute control of anything—and this is a function of my limited nature as a human being. Simon Tugwell says that “the first work of grace is simply to enable us to begin to understand what is wrong. And one of the first things that is wrong is that we are not in control; we do not have all the answers” (50).

The Essential Role of Imperfection

In the simplest terms, a spirituality that honors imperfection asks us to accept the reality that we are, at a very basic level, paradoxical beings. Following

this, the reality of that paradox necessarily means that we are not in absolute control of anything—ultimately including our students and their writing, as O'Reilly and Palmer, among others, suggest. This type of spirituality asks us to examine our willingness to relinquish that need for control, for it is only in doing so that we can begin to converse with our own spirits and, hence, our students.

Of course, these realizations have prompted me to pose a litany of questions to myself. How does my will-to-control exert itself in other areas of my teaching—in my writing assignments, student/teacher conferences, and my approach to writing groups in the classroom? Furthermore, is “letting go” of control really a viable pedagogical approach? Exactly how universal is this suggestion? Could this approach be harmful or dangerous in some situations? How does a teacher know when to “let go”? Indeed, might it sometimes be helpful for teachers to take control of students’ texts to show them a better way? And anyway, how does one define control?

In response to these slippery questions, perhaps a caveat is in order: I want to stress that any spiritual response or approach that I am discovering is right only for me—it is a proper one for my practice. While I feel confident that it has helped me become a better teacher, I can make no absolute claim here of its usefulness. Clearly, “letting go” will not work in everyone’s practice, and in some instances it might even be counterproductive. Instead, it has been important for me to understand that my reasons for wanting to explore control—and the spiritual response of “letting go”—stem from my own experience of teacher training as I mentioned, where no one dared to speak of such matters. In grade school, my experienced teachers sometimes restricted my freedom or creativity in repressive ways, especially in the writing classroom, but they told me their actions were “for my own good.” In her autobiographical *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins recalls similar tactics used by teachers to keep potentially disruptive students on task:

When Mrs. Seebach, of the enormous bosom and the enormous behind, bellowed at us in gym class, seized by demonic rage over a student’s failure properly to execute grand right and left, I trembled. I could have made the same mistake. Once Mrs. Seebach did ridicule me in front of the class because I didn’t know how to tie a knot at the end of a piece of thread; there was no knowing when it would happen again. (5)

I suspect that there might be a little of Mrs. Seebach in many of us, and perhaps the only way for a teacher to know when and how to let go is by paying attention. Ultimately, I do not know if it is possible for teachers of writing—or any teacher, for that matter—to relinquish the need to be right, the need to be effective, and the need to be in control and still teach what they have been hired to teach. One thing is certain for me, however: paying attention to my own penchant for controlling student texts, acknowledging my own and my students’ imperfections as the building blocks of our humanity, has delivered me to my students in ways that I never before thought possible. ☺

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